Viewpoint: The implications of urban contraction for the physical form of cities: the Japanese case

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Estelle Ducom, Départment de Géographie et Aménagement, Université Paris IV Sorbonne, 191 rue Saint Jacques, 75005, Paris, France. E-mail: estelle.ducom@paris-sorbonne.fr

Urban growth processes and their implications for urban form have been widely analysed. Urban morphologists have given especial attention to fringe belts (Conzen, 1960; Darin, 2000; Ducom, 2003; Whitehand and Morton, 2003). However, relatively little attention has been given to urban contraction, despite its significance at the present time in many parts of the world: Japan, Korea, Germany, Eastern Europe, United Kingdom, United States…(Oswalt, 2006 a). A number of large cities that had been extending their built-up areas over a very long period in those countries are now physically contracting, associated with, for example, industrial decline (Pallagst, 2005, Oswalt, 2006 b), population shrinkage (Fujimasa and Furukawa, 2000), sluggish land markets (Aveline and Ling-Hin, 2004) and political changes (Oswalt, 2006 b). The forces involved are sometimes acting in concert and sometimes independently. This process of contraction is liable to affect an increasing number of cities in the near future. But, paradoxically, neither its characteristics nor its implications for the physical form of cities have been much considered, studies in Germany being among the exceptions (Oswalt, 2006 a,b; Pallagst, 2005). The process awaits detailed consideration by the full range of disciplines and professions concerned with cities, not least urban morphology and planning.

In Japan, the population of the country as a whole is now declining. Urban contraction has already begun in many cities (Flüchter, 2006). Even in Tokyo itself, which is still slowly growing, some areas, especially more distant suburbs, are shrinking (Ducom and Yokohari, 2006). This has a number of ramifications in addition to the most obvious one of loss of population, including vacant buildings, closed schools, abandoned facilities (such as playgrounds and parks). In Tokyo, for example, there are zones of contraction about 50 km away from the city centre, in the less accessible areas, for instance far from railway stations.

This emerging phenomenon should not be confused with counterurbanization (Berry, 1976), which implies urban contraction at a local scale by the movement of people and employment away from large cities to places outside the cities, including small towns, villages and rural areas. On the contrary, urban shrinkage in Japan tends to involve a transfer of population towards city centres, which are currently being 'densified' by private developers, encouraged by the law on urban renewal of 2002. Several districts, like Shiodome in Minato-Ku (central Tokyo), have recently been transformed from railway terminals to skycraper districts of offices, hotels, restaurants, shops and luxury housing. Such projects, supported by Tokyo metropolitan government, widen the gap between increasingly powerful and compact centres and declining peripheries (Aveline, 2003). Despite the extent of the problem, planning practice continues to concentrate on managing urban renewal and redevelopment of the city centre, thus exacerbating the problems of distant suburbs. There is a curious failure to acknowledge the implications of projections of declining populations.

The traditional Japanese urban model, based on demographic and economic expansion, and leading to urban sprawl, is in need of transformation. Distant Japanese suburbs, brought into existence relatively recently during mounting pressure on land, are proving to be the first to be abandoned as pressure decreases. The transition from urban sprawl to urban shrinkage raises questions about the sustainability and reversibility of urban developments and about the appropriateness of the traditional urban model and its capacity for adaptation. Here surely are major research tasks for urban morphologists.

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